

**NIU Employee Assistance Program
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Fear, Anxiety, and Guilt After A Traumatic Event

When you have lived through a shocking event...*you survived a terrible accident, you lost your house in a tornado, you lost a loved one in an accident or severe storm, you or a loved one were attacked, or the place you thought was safe was violated by some form of violence or natural disaster...* your life is thrown into extreme disorganization and your normal coping skills are overwhelmed. You never believed this could happen to you and your world now feels surreal. Your orderly world is gone and your sense of control has disappeared.

As the shock lessens and you begin to accept little parts of your new reality, you are filled with disbelief. *“How could this have happened? If I had just..., I could have prevented it. Then, my life would go back to normal and I could feel safe again.”* Looking for answers is a way of regaining control. If you can regain control, then you do not feel helpless and scared.

Fear and Anxiety (www.mssm.edu/psychiatry/tssp/pdf/commonreactions.pdf)

Fear and anxiety are two immediate reactions to a traumatic life-threatening event when your sense of control has disappeared. Your perception about safety, sense of the world you live in, and your beliefs about life are all questioned and the ground you walk on no longer feels solid. You may find yourself easily startled, overly alert, and generally feeling jittery. As a result of your experience, you now believe the world is not safe and your body is on steady alert. You may also find yourself thinking negative thoughts about people and life events and generalize these thoughts into a belief that you *“cannot trust anyone”* or *“the world is a dangerous place.”* Maybe you start thinking: *“I can’t trust myself. I can’t cope with anything. I’m just weak and stupid.”*

What you can do when you are caught in the grip of fear and anxiety.

1. When you feel jittery and on high alert:
 - Do something that is routine or habitual. Do the dishes, mow the lawn, cook a meal, etc.
 - Go for a walk. It gives you a sense of being grounded, wears off stress, and releases serotonin which makes you feel good about yourself and the world.
 - Decide what high alert activity is useful and you want to incorporate into a habit. You may decide you want to be more consciously aware of your surroundings. Not on high alert, just an increase in awareness of what is going on around you.

2. When you are aware of negative thoughts:
 - Turn the negative thought to a neutral or positive statement. *“I can trust the people I know. I can trust myself to do the best I can in the moment. I can make good choices and do what I can with the information I have.”*
 - Develop a mantra: *“Life has risks, I can choose to take reasonable risks so I can fulfill my dreams and live my life.”*

3. When the world seems scary and dangerous, remember:
 - Fear is self-doubt and destroys your confidence. Giving in to fears makes life less safe, as you do NOT learn what you are capable of doing. If a parent never allows a child to do things for her or himself, then the child does not learn what he or she is capable of doing. When you live in fear, you bring upon yourself the losses you dread and keep yourself from growing.
 - Fear lets you know there MAY be danger. Recognize the danger and adapt to it. You only get to know a risk when you take it and taking the risk builds self-confidence.
 - Stretch yourself and take a small step into doing what you are afraid of, become comfortable with that step, and then take another step. Keep stepping into your fear and you will learn what you can do when you face your fears.

- Breathe deeply 3 times (in through your nose and slowly out your mouth) and repeat your mantra for strength and courage when you face your fears.
 - It is important to NOT allow your fears to keep you from living your life fully. Most accidents occur within 25 miles of home. Going to the store for milk is more risky than going on your dream vacation and flying to get there. An avoided risk is an experience unknown forever.
4. Avoiding your fears lowers your self-esteem and sense of worth. When you don't trust yourself to be able to deal with your fears, you never quite feel safe. When you allow your anticipated fear of the future – anxiety – to keep you from doing what you want, you don't master life's lessons.

So, decide to live your life fully despite your fears and use your fears to increase your awareness of potential dangers and adapt as needed. Life provides us with many opportunities to face our fears and master life's lessons.

What can you do when the burden of guilt is overwhelming? (www.giftfromwithin.org/html/guilt.html)

Guilt is what happens when you focus on the event which is in the past and worry about what you “*could have...*”, “*should have...*”, or “*if only had...*” done. After a traumatic event, people tend to overestimate their ability to have predicted what was going to happen and this overestimation can lead to increased assessment of culpability and self-blame. Being stuck in the past is difficult because you cannot change the past, only learn from it. Guilt focuses on your mistakes and blame, not learning.

1. When you have experienced a significant traumatic loss, you may experience *survivor guilt*. This is when you feel guilty that you have survived and someone you love has died, become very ill, or lost their home.
 - “*Why them and not me?*” is the frequent question for the person experiencing survivor guilt. You start to evaluate your life compared to the people who lost their life, health or home. Were you a better person? Is there a reason that they died and you didn't?
 - We want to believe that bad things only happen to people who deserve it. Not true, bad things just happen.
 - Most guilt is reduced to negative messages you give yourself that persuade you that you are a bad person, wrong, stupid, weak, unlovable or a failure.
 - Survivor guilt is a place where you can get stuck in self-doubt, self-blame, anxiety, and suffering.
 - Unresolved survivor guilt interferes with your well-being, trauma recovery, productive action, your normal progression through life and positive relations.
2. When you stop looking for answers where there are no answers, face what happened and move beyond your guilt; you move into exploring the universal question of “*What is my life's purpose and what is important to me as I live my life?*”

Reevaluating the meaning of your life and making the best of your life can be a tribute to your survival and to those who lost so much. Learning to treasure the best of each day and being alive can be the gift we receive from living through and experiencing a traumatic event.

**A New Normal...our lives will be different, our identity will be modified.
It is up to us how we allow any event to define us.**